

# Emotional Public: *Treme* as Post-Katrina Trauma Narrative

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**Abstract:** *Cultural traumas are social, discursive and narrative processes where traumatic events, such as Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and their memories are described and interpreted. In fiction, in this case in HBO's drama series Treme (2010-2013), trauma-related experiences are given meaning through narration, and in this mediation process collective memories are constructed. In this article, I analyze the ways in which the narration of Treme represents loss and remembering. I argue that by emphasizing sentimental nostalgia and the emotional reactions of the characters, the narration aims to create sympathy and empathy in the viewers, and in this way the drama series creates an emotional public sphere for the discussions over the rebuilding of post-Katrina New Orleans.*

**Keywords:** *Treme, cultural trauma, Hurricane Katrina, television narrative, emotional public sphere*

HBO's drama series *Treme* (2010-2013) discusses the cultural trauma related to Hurricane Katrina, which dramatically affected New Orleans in 2005. The disaster led to large evacuations and left about 80% of the city flooded and several hundreds of people dead. In particular, the hurricane affected the black and/or poor neighborhoods. In these areas the levees built for the protection of the city failed. Black/poor people also had less means to evacuate, and had to suffer in the city for days waiting for help to arrive. After the storm, many members of these communities were in a vulnerable position regarding their health and economic situations. For example, the city closed down several housing projects and many have named the rebuilding practices gentrification. As a consequence, Katrina has been ac-

cused of being a man-made disaster exposing the racial and social inequalities of the city.<sup>1</sup>

In a situation in which the authorities failed to provide emergency services for a multiracial community and largely neglected the rebuilding of the city, cultural artifacts, such as art, celebrations, music, film, and television – and shows such as *Treme* – have been used to promote New Orleans' future. Helen Taylor argues that the active cultural politics in post-Katrina New Orleans has reminded people of the city's unique history and made the continuation of these traditions possible. This survival, rebirth and international fame have given new life to what was supposed to be a "doomed" city.<sup>2</sup> Earlier research has paid attention to the authenticity of the represented experiences and to the use of local spaces in *Treme*, both of which increase a sense of belonging.<sup>3</sup> However, mere authenticity is not enough to engage the viewers. In order to make the viewer care about the fate of the city, emotionalization of the trauma plays an important role in creating a cultural trauma narrative. In this article, I study how and why the narrative and thematic solutions of *Treme* use emotions and recognition to make a public claim for the rebuilding of New Orleans. I argue that by emphasizing nostalgia and loss in a story of what was and what is to come, the series aims to create sympathy and empathy in the viewers.<sup>4</sup>

- 1 E.g. Gregory Squires & Chester Hartman (eds.) *There is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster: Race, Class, and Hurricane Katrina*. (New York & Milton Park: Routledge, 2006.); David L. Brunnsma, David Overfelt & J. Steven Picou (eds.) *The Sociology of Katrina: Perspectives on a Modern Catastrophe*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010.)
- 2 Helen Taylor, "After the Deluge: The Post-Katrina Cultural Revival of New Orleans," *Journal of American Studies* 44:3 (2010), 483, 488-97.
- 3 See, for example, Helen Morgan Parmett, "Media as a Spatial Practice: *Treme* and the Production of the Media Neighbourhood," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 28:3 (2014), 293-294; Helen Morgan Parmett, "Space, Place, and New Orleans on Television: From Frank's Place to *Treme*," *Television & New Media* 13:3 (2012), 193-212; Herman Gray, "Recovered, Reinvented, Reimagined: *Treme*, Television Studies and Writing New Orleans," *Television & New Media* 13:3 (2012), 268-278; Joy V. Fuqua, "In New Orleans, We Might Say It Like This...": Authenticity, Place, and HBO's *Treme*," *Television & New Media* 13:3 (2012), 235-242; Lynnell L. Thomas, "'People Want to See What Happened': *Treme*, Televisual Tourism, and the Racial Remapping of Post-Katrina New Orleans," *Television & New Media* 13:3 (2012), 213-244; Courtney George, "Keeping It 'Reals': Narratives of New Orleans Jazz History as Represented in HBO's *Treme*," *Television & New Media* 13:3 (2012), 225-234.
- 4 With the concepts of sympathy and empathy I refer to an engagement process where the viewer imagines the character's situation and emotions. In many theories, sympathy refers to the ways in which the viewer feels for the character in a certain situation, while empathy denotes the ways in which the viewer can momentarily share the character's emotions. See, Alison Landsberg, "Memory, Empathy, and the Politics of Identification," *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 22:2 (2009), 222-223; Murray

The story begins three months after the hurricane when the residents started to return to the city. Yet *Treme* aired five years after the storm, and it has a reflective approach to the events. David Simon, one of the producers, has claimed that by emphasizing the city's vibrant culture and history the series embraces New Orleans' musical tradition as an "American cultural contribution" which needs to be sustained.<sup>5</sup> The series is built on three cornerstones – history, music, and food, which according to Kevin Fox Gotham are also considered to be the three main themes of the urban branding of New Orleans.<sup>6</sup> The nostalgic approach makes the city one of the main characters, while the most important element of the narration in *Treme* is the engagement with the characters' emotions in a difficult situation. Even when the major plot is comprised of the slow revival of the city, the narrative tension builds on the daily lives of several characters who are related to either music or culinary traditions, which supports the idea that *Treme* is used to support the revival of New Orleans' culture.

Along with the hope of revival, the characters also embody a general sense of loss. They lose friends and family members. They suffer from mental and physical health problems: Professor Creighton Bernette's (John Goodman) depression and suicide and Albert "Big Chief" Lambreaux's (Clarke Peters) cancer. They have financial trouble: Chef Janette Desautel (Kim Dickens) has to close down her restaurant. And they face anxiety over increased corruption, violence and insecurity in the post-Katrina city: the rape of LaDonna Batiste-Williams (Khandi Alexander), the owner of a tavern, and the killing of musician Harley Wyatt (Steve Earle) on the streets of New Orleans. The series addresses many social, political, and cultural issues that have been raised in the aftermath: the diaspora due to the evacuations, the destruction of homes and jobs, as well as debates on the rebuilding practices and funding. Failing infrastructures and material destruction play in the background, whereas the narrative concentrates on the collective suffering and continuity of culture, such as music and cuisine.<sup>7</sup>

Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1995), 81-102.

5 Vince Beiser, "An Interview with David Simon," *The Progressive*, 28 Feb. 2011. <http://www.progressive.org/news/2011/02/157458/interview-david-simon> (Accessed 10 Aug. 2014).

6 Kevin Fox Gotham, *Authentic New Orleans: Tourism, Culture, and Race in the Big Easy*. (New York: *Canadian Review of American Studies* 43:1 (2013), 146, 151.

New York University Press, 2007), 137.

7 See also Kevin Dowler, "Dismemberment, Repetition, and Working-Through: Keeping Up in *Treme*,"

By using *Treme* as an example of the use of grief, suffering, and sentimental nostalgia, I discuss how television trauma narratives participate in public debates by means of emotion. My main research material consists of 4 seasons and 36 episodes of *Treme*. Additionally, and in order to discuss the contextual elements of the series, I also looked into the series' reception and the ways in which the audiences reacted to its post-Katrina arguments. By using thematic content analysis I interpret themes from the material which includes a "'Treme' explained" blog (2010-2013), where journalist Dave Walker discusses the local references of each episode in the New Orleans local newspaper *Times-Picayune*,<sup>8</sup> and online discussions about the series. The total number of analyzed comments is 524 and they are collected from HBO's official pages for the series, from the *Times-Picayune*'s pages, and from three more general sources on television programming and entertainment: HitFix, The A.V. Club, and TV.com.<sup>9</sup> I analyze the discussions at two moments: at the beginning of the series in 2010, when discussions deal with expectations and first impressions, and at the end of the broadcasting in 2013-2014, when discussions evaluate the series as a whole.

### Emotional Public and Trauma Narratives

Before turning to an analysis of *Treme*, I will first discuss the theoretical dimensions of trauma narratives and their use of emotions. The series is based on an existing cultural trauma that Hurricane Katrina left behind. Not all traumas are turned into cultural ones, but when collective and discursive processes, such as cultural representations, are used to deal with event, to interpret it and give meanings to it, the trauma turns into a cultural process. The narrations that discuss the traumatic events can also reconstruct the community and its self-image and identity.<sup>10</sup> Several scholars have noted

8 Dave Walker, "'Treme' explained" *NOLA.com/The Times-Picayune*, 11 April 2010 – 29 Dec. 2013. <http://www.nola.com/treme-hbo/> (Accessed 10 Nov. 2014).

9 <http://talk.hbo.com/t5/Treme/bdp/treme>; [http://www.nola.com/tremehbo/index.ssf/2010/04/treme\\_is\\_probably\\_as\\_good\\_as\\_i.html](http://www.nola.com/tremehbo/index.ssf/2010/04/treme_is_probably_as_good_as_i.html); [http://www.nola.com/tremehbo/index.ssf/2013/12/david\\_simon\\_on\\_what\\_hbos\\_treme.html#incart\\_river](http://www.nola.com/tremehbo/index.ssf/2013/12/david_simon_on_what_hbos_treme.html#incart_river); [http://www.nola.com/tremehbo/index.ssf/2013/12/hbos\\_treme\\_loved\\_it\\_hated\\_it\\_o.html#incart\\_river](http://www.nola.com/tremehbo/index.ssf/2013/12/hbos_treme_loved_it_hated_it_o.html#incart_river); <http://www.avclub.com/review/treme-dies-as-it-lived106063>; <http://www.hitfix.com/whats-alan-watching/series-finale-review-treme-to-miss-new-orleans-the-last-mardi-gras>; <http://www.tv.com/shows/treme/reviews/> (Accessed 24 Nov. 2014).

10 About definitions of trauma and cultural trauma, see Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma," ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser & Piotr Sztompka, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 10; Susan

how *Treme* has participated in the public discussion by reaching television audiences in New Orleans, the United States and internationally. The series has been seen as a prime example of how television plays a powerful role in creating public discussion, awareness, socially shared memories, and identities.<sup>11</sup>

Traditionally, discussion about the public sphere has been dominated by Jürgen Habermas' theories.<sup>12</sup> Habermas highlighted the rational role of the public use of reason, but recent media studies recognize the equal importance of irrationality and emotions. The emergence of, for example, reality television, confessional talk shows (such as *Dr. Phil*), social media, and even the emotionalization of political debates, have widened the understanding of the nature of public discussions.<sup>13</sup> Barry Richards seeks to redefine Habermas' concepts by identifying an emotional public sphere, and emphasizes how emotional engagement and reactions can cause and influence social movements.<sup>14</sup> The recognition for the role of emotions in media and in society has been connected to the rise of a therapeutic culture in which emotional expressions are part of a constant process of self-discovery and social identification.<sup>15</sup> Roger Luckhurst, for example, argues that the 1980s

J. Brison, "Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self," ed. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe & Leo Spitzer, *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. (Hanover: University Press of New England 1999), 41-43; Ron Eyerman, "Social theory and trauma," *Acta Sociologica* 56:1 (2013), 43; Malgorzata Kalinowska, "Monuments of memory: defensive mechanisms of the collective psyche and their manifestation in the memorialization process," *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 57:4 (2012), 427; Shelly A. Wiechelt, & Jan Gryczynski, "Cultural and Historical Trauma Among Native Americans," ed. Shoshana S. Ringel & Jerrold R Brandell, *Trauma: Contemporary Directions in Theory, Practice, and Research*. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012), 192-197.

- 11 Bernie Cook, *Flood of Images: Media, Memory, and Hurricane Katrina*. (Austin: University of Texas Press 2015); Gray, 268-278; Wade Rathke, "Treme for Tourists: The Music of the City without the Power," *Television & New Media* 13:3 (2012), 261-267. On television and the public, see, for example, Jostein Gripsrud, "Television and the European Public Sphere," *European Journal of Communication* 22:4 (2007), 481-83.
- 12 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Translated by Thomas Burger. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).
- 13 See, for example, Gripsrud, 479-92; Jim McGuigan, "The Cultural Public Sphere," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 8:4 (2005), 427-443; Jodi Dean, "Cybersalons and Civil Society: Rethinking the Public Sphere in Transnational Technoculture," *Public Culture* 13:2 (2001), 243-265.
- 14 Barry Richards, "News and the Emotional Public Sphere," ed. S. Allan, *The Routledge Companion to News and Journalism Studies*. (London: Routledge 2009), 301-311.
- 15 Frank Furedi, *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age*. (London: Routledge, 2003); Barry Richards, *Emotional Governance: Politics, Media and Terror*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Anita Biressi & Heather Nunn, *Reality TV: Realism and Revelation*. (New York: Columbia

increased the awareness of post-traumatic-stress-disorder effects and after having lived in this, therapy culture which has seen the psychologization of society, we now live in an “aftermath” society with an active wound culture in which emotions need to be managed.<sup>16</sup>

*Treme* as a trauma narrative is a prime example of a drama series which consciously uses recognizable emotions in order to manage traumatic events. In *Treme*, loss, mourning and other related emotions are harnessed to justify the rebuilding practices. Remembering lost people and a lost culture are important narrative threads, and deaths, funerals and destruction occur in several episodes. Grief is an important emotion for the drama, not least because of its power and passion. Besides loss, grief connects to an array of other emotions, such as a sense of injustice, anger and depression.<sup>17</sup> The first season, especially, concentrates on despair. Thus, when a struggling local chef Janette has to close her restaurant she comments “this town has beat me, as much as I love it.”<sup>18</sup> The university professor Creighton Bernette, who suffers from post-Katrina depression, observes that “whatever comes next, it is just a dream of what used to be.”<sup>19</sup> And LaDonna, thinking about her future as a tavern owner, wonders “What am I doing? City will never be the same.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, the sense of loss is connected to anxiety about the future of the city.

Grief in the series has a social and political potential. Health psychologist Leeat Granek has recognized three main ways to politicize grief. First is the medicalization of grief, where the power of definition is controlled by (medical) authorities. Second, governments can manipulate grief to justify political aims (including justifying the war on terror after 9/11<sup>21</sup>). And thirdly, and most importantly in relation to *Treme*, grief can be used to activate social activism and demand social change.<sup>22</sup> In other words, deliber-

University Press, 2005); Mimi White, *Tele-Advising: Therapeutic Discourse in American Television*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

16 Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*. (London: Routledge, 2008), 209-214.

17 Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, for example, has written about emotional processes related to loss and grief in *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1970).

18 Janette Desautel, “Wish Someone Would Care,” *Treme* S1: E9, 13 Jun. 2010.

19 Creighton Bernette, “All on a Mardi Gras Day,” *Treme* S1: E8, 6 Jun. 2010.

20 LaDonna Batiste-Williams, “At the Foot of Canal Street,” *Treme* S1: E4, 2 May 2010.

21 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. (London: Verso, 2004).

22 Leeat Granek, “Mourning Sickness: The Politicizations of Grief,” *Review of General Psychology* 18:2 (2014), 61-68. See, also, Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009); Gail Holst-Warhaft, *The Cue for Passion: Grief and Its Political Uses*. (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2000).

ate use of grief in cultural trauma narrative is one way to influence public discussions. Cultural sociologist Jeffrey Alexander emphasizes that cultural representations of trauma are, indeed, “claims about the shape of social reality, its causes, and the responsibilities for action such causes imply.”<sup>23</sup>

Several trauma theorists have argued that cultural processes in which the trauma is worked through include the possibility of reconstructing the community and its self-image and identity, sometimes even the prospect of healing it.<sup>24</sup> The desire to heal is visible in *Treme*, as well. Whereas the first season introduced the characters struggling with loss, the second season seems to unravel the social bond even further. Several main characters are victimized by other residents, who rape, murder and violently attack each other. The unwanted direction of the city also forces changes, and season three, in particular, starts to move on from despair and violence.

The tagline of the third season “Hurricanes. Floods. Exile. Crime. Corruption. Betrayal. Greed. Neglect. Is That All You Got?” shows that the characters are unwilling to let their city be destroyed. After the opening credits of the first episode, Annie T and the Bayou St. John Playboys perform “That All You Got?” at d.b.a., a live music club in New Orleans. The song was specifically written for the series by Steve Earle. He actually played musician Harley who got shot in an armed robbery during the second season. The lyrics represent the ironic relationship with the reputation of the city and the residents’ desire to fight for their city’s future.

Nothin’ ever comes from outa nowhere  
 Ain’t nobody ever rides for free  
 There’s a 100 million heartaches out there  
 ‘Tween the devil and the deep blue sea  
 And all the troubles of the wide world flow  
 Down the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico  
 Here it comes again - Ready or not  
 Worry and pain? Is That all you got?<sup>25</sup>

However, despite the represented desire to heal, the series also uses a strategy where the cultural product maintains the post-traumatic condition by

23 Alexander, 11, 27; see also Kalinowska, 426.

24 Alexander, 22; Kalinowska, 426; Wiechelt & Gryczynski, 197-199.

25 “Knock with Me, Rock with Me,” *Treme* S3: E1, 23 Sep. 2012.

refusing to forget traumatic events.<sup>26</sup> *Treme* refuses any closure, or completed healing, for its story and characters. Instead, the last season repeatedly brings forward the question of legacy. At the story level, the characters worry about their personal legacies, and the cultural and historical legacy of the city. They recognize the problematic relationship with nostalgia and the transforming city. The desired future where the city's culture is thriving again appears to be happening, yet the discussions are often directed towards the past, as is suggested in a song used in the final episode: "Do You Know What It Means To Miss New Orleans?"<sup>27</sup>

These themes relate to the question of the series' cultural legacy.<sup>28</sup> By denying any narrative closure *Treme* sees cultural trauma as an ongoing emotional process. After the immediate consequences of trauma are over, the struggles and need for the support remain. Whereas trauma studies often want to consider cultural representations as important ways to work through historical trauma, its functions are not always as clear cut.<sup>29</sup>

### Character Engagement and Grief

In *Treme*, character engagement is used to communicate trauma. Sandra Heinen and Stefan Deines write that in representing history, narrative strategies in general emphasize subjectivity and various perspectives where several "individualized memories" can be used to make a statement of the past.<sup>30</sup> Similarly *Treme* creates several entry points into the story. The series aims to create recognizable experiences and emotions while highlighting post-traumatic subjectivity – there is not just one way to experience trauma. As Heinen and Deines argue, in trauma narratives, emotions and subjective perceptions are more important than factual events, and objectivity is

26 Luckhurst, 209-214; Kalinowska, 428, 438.

27 "To Miss New Orleans," *Treme* S4: E5, 29 Dec. 2013.

28 The producers have also wondered what legacy the series is leaving New Orleans and its viewers. See, for example, David Simon, "David Simon on what HBO's 'Treme' meant to him and what he hopes it meant to New Orleanians," *Nola.com*, 28 Dec. 2013. [http://www.nola.com/tremehbo/index.ssf/2013/12/david\\_simon\\_on\\_what\\_hbos\\_treme.html#incart\\_river](http://www.nola.com/tremehbo/index.ssf/2013/12/david_simon_on_what_hbos_treme.html#incart_river) (Accessed 11 Feb. 2014).

29 Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 3-9.

30 Sandra Heinen & Stefan Deines, "History and Biography in *Die zweite Heimat*: Narrative Strategies to Represent the Past," ed. Allrath, Gaby & Marion Gymnich, *Narrative Strategies in Television Series*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 200-203, 207.



replaced with experience because it “enables the viewers to activate their own memories and thus participate in the (hi)story.”<sup>31</sup>

In addition to several viewpoints, *Treme* utilizes the reputation of Tremé, a local African-American neighborhood, as being a home for New Orleans’ jazz and brass band tradition, even when introducing a wider cultural community of the city.<sup>32</sup> The represented traditions belong, for the most part, to African-American culture, and it is interesting to ask whose cultural trauma is the series focusing on? The characters can be divided into two major categories: people from the black and white communities. In many ways, the black characters embody the suffering and struggles for slow revival of the city, while the white characters represent nostalgia and desire for the rebirth of cultural practices.

From the black community most of the characters are musicians. Albert “Big Chief” Lambreaux, a Mardi Gras Indian chief, returns immediately after the storm to revive the tribal practices. Historically, Mardi Gras Indians have addressed the city’s racial politics: the carnival-related tribal parades and the training for these parades have provided a possibility to perform African music and dances.<sup>33</sup> In *Treme*, Big Chief symbolizes the continuing racial struggles that tribes faced due to the flooding, diaspora, and local authorities’ reluctance to continue celebrations. Big Chief fights other residents and local authorities to resurrect the tradition. In season four, the chief’s position is symbolically passed to the next generation, after Albert’s death by cancer (which is most likely related to his unhealthy living conditions after the storm).

Other black main characters include Albert’s son Delmond (Rob Brown), who feels more at home in New York’s jazz scene and who represents the comparison between the “original” New Orleans jazz and “professional” New York jazz. Trombonist Antoine Batiste (Wendell Pierce) personifies the common challenges in making a living in post-Katrina New Orleans. He is constantly hunting for his next gig at a time when tourism, the city’s major income, took a big hit. Antoine’s ex-wife, LaDonna, is similarly struggling to get her tavern back in business, but she also becomes the em-

31 Heinen & Deines, 200, 208.

32 See also Michael E. Jr Crutcher, *Treme: Race and Place in a New Orleans Neighborhood* (Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2010).

33 Cynthia Becker, “New Orleans Mardi Gras Indians: Mediating Racial Politics from the Backstreets to Main Street,” *African Arts* 46:2 (2013), 46-48.

bodiment for the “doomed” city. In the first season, she is fighting to find out what happened to her brother who went missing during the storm. In the end, her brother’s body is found in the nameless piles of bodies stored in trucks waiting for disposal. In the second season, she is raped in her bar. Despite the pressure, she refuses to give up her business and continues to push her way forward. Her character symbolizes both the emotional and physical destruction of the city.

In comparison, the whites are eager consumers of the African-American culture of the city, and as such they represent the need for the rebirth of cultural practices, not only for the black community, but for white consumers and (white) tourists, for the white gaze. For example, the street musicians Sonny (Michiel Huisman) and Annie (Lucia Micarelli) represent out-of-town people who want to make their career in music and feel drawn to the city’s atmosphere. The white characters have also been less affected by the material destruction, and they have different resources to concentrate on local (cultural) politics: Davis McAlary (Steve Zahn), who is from an Uptown family, but prefers to identify with underground culture, is a part-time DJ and musician, keen to revive the city’s party traditions, and Antoinette “Toni” Bernette (Melissa Leo) is a civil rights lawyer, who investigates NOPD corruption and defends musicians and people abused by the justice system.

Whereas the black characters embody suffering, the white characters represent nostalgia for the pre-hurricane culture. Even when the white characters have been through loss – a local chef Janette fails to keep her restaurant open and moves to New York only to return later on, and an English professor Creighton Bernette suffers from posttraumatic depression and commits suicide at the end of the first season – their feeling of loss is related in the narration to the hopeless desire to bring back the cultural identity of the city. The contradiction is visible in the final episode of the first season which represents giving up and is named after a gospel hymn often played at jazz funerals, “I’ll Fly Away.”<sup>34</sup> In the episode, DJ Davis tries to convince Janette to stay. He takes her on a journey through the city to highlight the beauty of its culture, music, and traditions. At another location, Toni finds out that her husband committed a suicide. “He fucking quit,” she grieves.

34 Dave Walker, “‘Treme’ explained: ‘I’ll Fly Away’”, *NOLA.com /The Times-Picayune*, 10 June 2010; [http://www.nola.com/treme-hbo/index.ssf/2010/06/treme\\_explained\\_ill\\_fly\\_away.html](http://www.nola.com/treme-hbo/index.ssf/2010/06/treme_explained_ill_fly_away.html) (Accessed 10 Nov. 2014).

The white characters' decisions to quit are framed by LaDonna's grief at her brother's funeral. She is in agony, yet joins the dancing in the second line.<sup>35</sup> The black characters do not have the luxury to quit.

In *Treme*, the story is placed within the everyday lives of the residents and in this way, the viewer, too, participates in the local people's intimate lives. The opening scene of the second season pinpoints *Treme's* way of weaving its characters into the narration. On All Saints' Day (November 1, 2006), a day dedicated to remembering and visiting the cemeteries of New Orleans, a young boy sits on a porch practicing the trumpet. His mother gets annoyed with the noise and asks the boy to take his act to the streets. The boy gets up and walks along the street with his trumpet. The next image focuses on the flowers, crosses and candles at the cemetery where Antoine Batiste is visiting his friend's grave and playing Jelly Roll Morton's "I Thought I Heard Buddy Bolden Say" at his friend's grave. Then the camera shifts to a gateway from where a scene of LaDonna's brother's funeral parade was filmed at the end of the last season. The gateway shot reveals another visitor, Big Chief. For a short while, the narration cuts to the local ice cream parlor, which has been reopened. Toni is visiting the place with her daughter Sofia. They agree how good it is to be back.

After this glimpse, we return to the cemetery, where Antoine keeps playing, LaDonna is visiting her brother's grave with her mother, and where "Big Chief" strokes his wife's gravestone. After these images, we return to the ice cream parlor where Sofia wishes her father, who committed suicide in the first season, were there. After this, the image returns to the boy practicing his trumpet. He plays the same tune over and over again as he walks past the cemetery. Big Chief, who is painting the family tomb back to its glory, hears the boy practicing and looks at him with an approving glance.<sup>36</sup> These seemingly separate images are woven together by music. Within this rhythm the fates of the citizens, their losses, and their futures are brought together. Mourning and hope are present at the same time, thus creating an atmosphere that lasts throughout the series.

The changing viewpoints in the narration provide access to the different characters and their feelings, thoughts, and action. Similarly, use of both black and white characters is a way to provide recognizable entry points for different viewers. In addition to recognition and access, Murray Smith

35 "I'll Fly Away," *Treme* S1: E10, 20 June, 2010.

36 "Accentuate the Positive," *Treme* S2: E1, 24 Apr. 2011.

argues that the engagement process includes a moral evaluation of the characters which is important for producing empathy or sympathy toward those characters. In this assessment, the characters' behavior is one crucial element, but Smith also argues for the significance of contexts and co-texts.<sup>37</sup> In this case, the contextual elements of an existing trauma create a frame for a sympathetic reading of the characters' lives.

Dave Walker, the writer of a weekly blog "Treme Explained" devoted to the contexts and cultural references of the series, pays particular attention to the common post-Katrina experiences. Most of his writings contain factual information on the shooting locations, which feature local restaurants, bars, and cultural institutions (25% of all introduced topics in his blog texts),<sup>38</sup> introduce (local) people who participated in episodes (23%),<sup>39</sup> and list played music and scores (22%). To some topics he gives more attention, opening up the stories behind the script. These themes include familiarizing the viewers with local traditions and history, such as Mardi Gras (14%), the real life events related to the Hurricane and its aftermath (8%), and insights into production experiences (4%). Even though these comments are smaller in number, they are discussed at greater length.

In this way, Walker guides attention to the topics that he considers important in post-Katrina New Orleans. Among other topics, Walker wants to highlight the emotional responses to the hurricane. In his text about the first episode, he comments on a local post-Katrina salutation, "So, how's your house?"<sup>40</sup>, heard in the premiere. He writes:

(o)ne of the most effective elements in the "Treme" premiere episode is how subtly it demonstrates the post-K phenomenon of The Relativity of Misery. Some characters were wiped out by the floodwaters. Others have resumed their lives with relatively little disruption. However bad

37 Smith, 6-7, 19-20, 187-188, 190-193.

38 Not only are the episodes full of local references, but the on-location shooting extends to different neighborhoods and local bars, musical venues and restaurants. See Parmett, "Media as a spatial practice", 293-294.

39 Some characters have factual role models in the cultural scene of the city, and several local people had a chance to work as actors, extras, or advisors in the show. Jazz musician Donald Harrison, Jr., for example, who is a model for Delmond's character, was a consultant for the production, and DJ Davis Rogan, a real-life model for Davis McAlary's character, participated in writing the series. A solution in which local cultural and musical icons participate in the creation of show – either on or off screen – ties the show to the everyday life of the city.

40 "Do You Know What It Means", *Treme* S1: E1, 11 April, 2010.

you got it from the storm or the flopping-levee flood or both, whoever you were telling your story to might've got it worse. The simple salutation, "So, how's your house?" could become, instantly, the first line of the saddest novel you've ever read.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, he explains why a simple phrase should be interpreted as an emotional bonding between the characters. Another favorite topic for Walker is to pinpoint the depression experienced by many of the characters. For example, when Janette Desautel starts crying over the overcooked eggs,<sup>42</sup> Walker sees the event as "painfully familiar to New Orleans viewers" as part of "the overwhelming task ahead at just restoring your life." For Walker these engaging emotional moments demonstrate the importance of represented experiences:

Depression was chronic in the city during the days depicted so far in the series, even among residents who were comparatively lucky. "Treme" may not hit a note that rings truer with New Orleans viewers than Desautel's sad breakfast moment.<sup>43</sup>

However, not all the viewers would recognize the detailed contextual information, and they might not even be expected to do so. It is not uncommon that the trauma narratives choose to use such distortion as part of their narrative strategies in order to create verisimilitude: they mimic reconstructed, often compulsively repetitive and distorted, trauma memories.<sup>44</sup> Luckhurst argues that aesthetic solutions, such as fragmented narration, temporal irregularity and the use of flashbacks, can appear experimental, yet nowadays it has also become conventionalized and identifiable in trauma narrations.<sup>45</sup> In *Treme*, similarly, the narration jumps from one character to another in a seemingly unrelated way, and also the episodes refuse to follow each other

41 Dave Walker, "'Treme' explained: 'Do You Know What it Means'", *NOLA.com / The Times-Picayune*, 11 April 2010. [http://www.nola.com/treme-hbo/index.ssf/2010/04/hbos\\_treme\\_explained\\_do\\_you\\_kn.html](http://www.nola.com/treme-hbo/index.ssf/2010/04/hbos_treme_explained_do_you_kn.html) (Accessed 10 Nov. 2014).

42 "Meet De Boys on the Battlefront," *Treme* S1: E2, 18 April, 2010.

43 Dave Walker, "'Treme' explained: 'Meet de Boys on the Battlefront'" *NOLA.com / The Times-Picayune*, 18 April 2010, [http://www.nola.com/treme-hbo/index.ssf/2010/04/treme\\_explained\\_meet\\_de\\_boys\\_o.html](http://www.nola.com/treme-hbo/index.ssf/2010/04/treme_explained_meet_de_boys_o.html) (Accessed 10 Nov. 2014).

44 Luckhurst, 5-6; Alexander, 18; Eyerman, 43.

45 Luckhurst, 79-86.

systematically. There are irregular passages of time between the episodes and the only directive is the notion of time that has passed since the hurricane. Not all events are shown, they are just mentioned by characters without lengthy explanations. As such, the narration turns into a mosaic where the viewer is left to make sense of the events.

### **Nostalgia and the Importance of Continuing Traditions**

Among sporadic events, the main theme in *Treme* is the revival of the city. Thus, New Orleans becomes more than a location or background, it becomes an actor, a character, in its own right in the narration. Although the city is living and breathing, the main reference point is in the past, in the pre-storm cultural traditions of music and parades. Courtney George reminds us that *Treme* is addressed to a general audience whose understanding of New Orleans and its musical tradition is varied.<sup>46</sup> This audience is most likely to recognize traditional jazz and brass band music as well as New Orleans' role in it. In this way, music can be used to create recognition, which makes it easier for the viewer to participate in the processes of remembering and rebuilding. The episodes are in fact named after (well-known) New Orleans jazz songs, such as *When the Saints Go Marching In*, *Tipitina*, and *All on a Mardi Gras Day*. By choosing to use the shared and public heritage of African-American music, the show allows viewers to relate to the fate of New Orleans.

When referring to the past, the music sequences narrate remembrance and provoke notions of nostalgia. Television researcher Faye Woods argues that music has been intended as an important source of nostalgia in television on account of its emotionality and connections to a certain time. However, she continues, nostalgia should not only be understood in terms of the past or that which has been lost, but also in terms of social criticism.<sup>47</sup> Some nostalgia theorists, such as Linda Hutcheon, connect nostalgia to moments of social or political crisis when a return to a more certain past is desired.<sup>48</sup> In *Treme*, remembering the culture of the city plays through music, and

46 George, 226.

47 Faye Woods, "Nostalgia, Music and the Television Past Revisited in American Dreams," *Music, Sound & the Moving Image* 2:1 (2008), 27, 30-32.

48 Linda Hutcheon, *Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern* (Toronto: University of Toronto English Language Main Collection, 1998).

thus, nostalgic emotions created in this process are used to persuade the audience of the importance of continuing traditions in the present and the future.

In *Treme*, the need for continuance before and after the storm is visible in the musicians' talk and interpersonal relationships. The dialogue of the series contains several moments where the characters talk about legendary musicians and their legacy, which is then reproduced through the musical performances by contemporary artists. In the second season, for example, together with his son Delmond, Albert Lambreaux creates a fusion record of modern jazz and traditional music of Mardi Gras Indians. This cultural product combines the past and the future into a single musical experience, and demonstrates that old traditions are useful and lively. These moments of remembering the past through contemporary practices are crucial to the creation of continuity amidst a chaotic situation. Indeed, in *Treme's* interpretation of New Orleans, music has an important social and political function to bring people together. By doing so it helps to rebuild not only the city, but the cultural tradition that was (momentarily) lost.<sup>49</sup>

In general, in the processing of trauma, the past is always re-narrated, re-owned and controlled, and in the process of making new connections between the past and the present, the envisioned future changes as well.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, Woods argues that the notion of nostalgia is complex, especially in relation to music choices in television programming. The music of earlier generations is always incorporated into the contemporary culture. Thus, while carrying "emotional and connotational effect," music can also include new meanings. As a consequence, a nostalgic memory process works in the present as well.<sup>51</sup> In *Treme*, as well, the use of traditional jazz demands the recovering of the culture.

Some critics, such as Lynnell L. Thomas, have argued that *Treme* fails to present the more recent post-Katrina musical scene (bounce music, rap, and hip hop), which has become an important part of black political rage in New Orleans.<sup>52</sup> Whereas Thomas emphasizes the inauthentic interpretation

49 Even though Lynnell L. Thomas criticizes the lack of the newer music, she, too, observes the significance of black history, tradition, and culture as having shaped New Orleans and conveys the idea of something that needs to be revived. Thomas, 218.

50 Brison 39-40; Eyerman, 48.

51 Woods, 27-32.

52 Thomas, 218.

of the contemporary music scene in *Treme*, I would emphasize the notion of imagined history. The drama does not attempt to create a “true” image of post-Katrina New Orleans, although it offers carefully chosen insights into the city’s rebuilding practices. George, too, argues that in *Treme* the New Orleans jazz scene is both “fictionalized and historicized,” and as a television performance it aims to provoke social and political commentary on the city’s cultural identity after Katrina.<sup>53</sup> The prolonged and regular musical scenes give the show its distinct atmosphere but they also communicate the need to continue existing traditions. Thus, the choice of traditional jazz creates a meaningful time span in the sense that it brings the past, present and future of the city together.

Despite the historical musical references, the emphasis of the narration of events is on the present. The film scholar Thomas Elsaesser has connected the temporality of narration to questions of memory and trauma.<sup>54</sup> At the level of images, the rare references to the hurricane appear during the opening credits, where the pictures of destruction and mouldy photos of and by the residents are shown along with the archive material from the city. An actual flashback is only used once, at the end of the first season when a missing person, Daymo (Daryl Williams), is finally buried. From the funeral the story transfers to Daymo’s fate and the moments before the hurricane hit the city. Other characters are evacuating from the city while Daymo gets arrested, and later on he dies in custody. From the past the sequence returns to the funeral, the look of agony on LaDonna’s face, and the blessing of the body.<sup>55</sup> In a way, this is also an attempt to put the hurricane to rest, not by forgetting, but by remembering and feeling.

At other times, when the hurricane is revisited, memories are already in culturally processed forms. This kind of remembering increases in the third season, but already during the second season, Annie plays at a photograph exhibition that concentrates on the hurricane.<sup>56</sup> A similar event takes place in the third season, when the Mardi Gras Indian family watches the documentary *Trouble the Water* (2008).<sup>57</sup> Like Annie, the family is clearly

53 George, 225, 229, 232.

54 Thomas Elsaesser, “Digital Cinema: Delivery, Event, Time,” ed. Thomas Elsaesser and Kay Hoffmann, *Cinema Futures: Cain, Abel or Cable? The Screen Arts in the Digital Age*. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1998), 204–205.

55 “I’ll Fly Away,” *Treme* S1: E10, 20 Jun. 2010.

56 “On Your Way Down,” *Treme* S2: E3, 8 May 2011.

57 “Promised Land,” *Treme* S3: E7, 4 Nov. 2012.



affected by the memories the pictures evoke, but they are treated with silence and the viewer may only witness the emotion, not the interpretation. In the third season the characters start to work their own trauma through culture; DJ Davis plans an opera about Katrina and Annie finishes a song of the city's reluctance to give up. In the story, "This City" has been Annie's and Harvey's shared project that began in the first season.<sup>58</sup> After Harvey's death, Annie starts performing it. The lyrics are defiant ("This city won't ever die/ Just as long as our heart beats strong/ Like a second line steppin' high/ Raisin' hell as we roll along"), yet the music is haunting and nostalgic, adding a layer of bitter-sweet sadness. In the narration, these cultural memories become ways in which the survivors are empowered and can organize their chaotic memories. Their practices embody the trauma processes: The trauma victims too often become silent objects of someone else's speech and the process where their subjectivity is returned is important, yet difficult.<sup>59</sup>

In this way, the series highlights the importance of local experience, memories, and interpretation. An underlying theme in the series addresses the post-Katrina debates on who has the right to define the city's culture. Through the chosen narrative perspective, the series claims that the residents should have the power to define the identity of the city in the situation where the city struggled to find a balance between the demands of federal level politicians, local politicians, city residents, tourists, and the wider public of the United States. The show presents several conflicts between authorities and residents, including the conflicts between the music performed in the city streets either in parades or by street musicians. The authorities consider these social events to be the catalyst for mayhem, which indeed happens every now and then. During the first season, especially the fate of the traditional Mardi Gras parades is threatened. When the parades are allowed to take place, it brings people together and creates hope for the future.<sup>60</sup>

The same tensions are visible when the authorities would like to modernize the city and local cultural figures reject these plans. On the one hand,

58 The song is composed for *Treme* by Steve Earle, and his version of the song accompanies the closing credits of the first season.

59 Brison, 47. See also, Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj, "Experience and Interpretation: Emotion as Revealed in Narration," *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* 2:2 (2008), 10.

60 George, 347.

the local politician Liguori and the contractor Nelson Hidalgo discuss the fact that the city's devotion to the past is also stopping its progress, such as building the new Jazz Centre.<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, DJ Davis argues that these kinds of centers would be museums, not birthplaces for new traditions and living culture.<sup>62</sup> By taking the viewer into this world of local musicians, the series makes a strong case for saving the city, including its poorest and most afflicted parts, because by letting these neighborhoods vanish, cultural traditions would also disappear.

Another important and recurrent theme is the integration of new generations into tradition. However, just as Katrina caused disruption to the continuity of New Orleans' life, transmitting traditions is problematic. The children of musician fathers do not follow in their footsteps, but find their own interests in life. When Big Chief Lambreaux dies of cancer, his son Delmond does not wish to take the role of the Indian chief, but carries on the tradition in his own way, and Antoine's sons are interested in other musical genres than jazz. There is no automatic passing of traditions from one generation to another, however, and different means are sought by Lambreaux and Antoine. Antoine teaches young kids at school and invites them to take part in the musical scene of the city, and Big Chief accepts a young boy into the music practices of his Indian tribe and starts passing on the traditions. Through the involvement of new generations, *Treme* highlights the continuance of traditional music – and the city's identity – into a future in which neither traditional music nor the city can be taken for granted.

Through recognizable music, *Treme* as a television drama created a very unique connection to its audience. The experience could be described by what Alison Landsberg calls the "prosthetic memory," where a viewer is given an experience that is not part of his/her own lived experience. In other words, the viewer is asked to look at some events through others' eyes and make them meaningful. This mediated engagement creates sensuous, circulated, and commodified memories. Because they feel real, these memories help the viewer identify with the situation of others.<sup>63</sup> Thus, by careful selection of music, the television show manages to create empathy for the residents of New Orleans by situating the viewer inside the remembering and rebuilding processes. And by choosing to create these shared

61 For example, "Slip Away," *Treme* S2: E5, 22 May 2011.

62 DJ Davis, "Yes We Can Can," *Treme* S4: E1, 1 Dec. 2013.

63 Landsberg, 221–22.

“prosthetic memories” through local people and their music, *Treme* argues on behalf of a certain version of the city which should be renewed.

### Reception of the Series

Cultural trauma and the success of these claims to restore what has been lost are always connected to reception. Susan Brison argues that to make a trauma meaningful in a culture, others have to be empathetic to the survivor’s experience.<sup>64</sup> Thus, in order to see whether the narrative manages to create empathy for the cause, I will also briefly discuss the reception of the series. The series addresses viewers in the similar manner than it pictures the new musical generations of the city – through participation and engagement based on nostalgic and emotional recognition. The viewers may recognize the emotional struggles of the characters, the nostalgic sense of music and cultural traditions, and familiar places for many of those who have visited the city either before or after the storm. As Kevin Dowler argues, *Treme* offers ways to remember and work through the trauma caused by the disaster: the series manages to create rememberment as it tries to restore the loss of lifestyle.<sup>65</sup>

In the *Treme*-related online commentary, the reception can be divided into two distinct (and self-proclaimed) audience groups: the current and former residents of New Orleans and the non-residents. The residents are eager commentators, and about 56% of the commentators introduce themselves as being from the city or close-by areas.<sup>66</sup> The ways in which the locals felt a need to engage in conversations about the series also shows their desire to participate in cultural trauma processing. The non-residents included about 10% of commentators who had visited the city and had their own personal memories and experiences about the place, but about 4% were other non-residents who had not visited the city and to whom ideas related to New Orleans were based on news and cultural products. It also important to note that about 30% of the commentators did not indicate what their relation to the city was.

64 Brison, 43, 36. See also Alexander, 12.

65 Dowler, 146-148, 155.

66 The responses from the local news site NOLA.com are also included in the figures. The online discussions on the HBO and NOLA.com pages tended to attract people who liked the series, and more varied perspectives were found on pages which concentrated on a wide range of television series.

In the beginning of the series, the residents had high hopes as well as fears about the series. One of the locals wrote: "Life after Katrina has not been easy, but our culture of music, food and friendship made our return, our recovery and our rebirth inevitable. If HBO comes even close to capturing what our lives were like post-K, I'd be happy."<sup>67</sup> By the time the series ended, the clear majority of residents appreciated the efforts to support the rebuilding practices, making such comments as "Thank you, David Simon & Co. for reflecting our city back at us and for reminding us that the work of (re)-Creation remains unfinished and that it is up to us to fix what is broken or incomplete,"<sup>68</sup> and "for those of us who struggled though[sic.] the Katrina experience, it was cathartic to see it retold so genuinely."<sup>69</sup>

Many non-residents also highlighted the show's cultural importance in raising awareness of the flood's consequences: "It keeps the memory of Katrina and the extreme devastation caused by it alive. Those folks in New Orleans still have not received the support they deserve and need."<sup>70</sup> Some even articulated that the show helped them to gain new insights into the region. One commentator who identified herself as a Belgian argued that she had no special interest in this culture before the show. Yet, "after watching *Treme*, these same two words [New Orleans] mean so much more. Hell, they almost evoked a feeling of caring for the preservation/continuation of this lively scene. ... I didn't imagine a TV series could ever achieve something like that."<sup>71</sup> These comments show that *Treme*, indeed, managed to achieve a public awareness for its cause. However, this was not always considered a positive thing by (non-resident) viewers. The series was sometimes seen to be lecturing the audience in a "preachy" way that underestimated the viewers and damaged the storytelling.<sup>72</sup>

The discussions on the webpages reveals that viewers are aware of the tension between the real and the imagined city. For contemporary and former New Orleans residents, *Treme* appeared both sensitive and significant. Several locals argued that the city had often been misrepresented in the national media, but *Treme*, despite some of its inaccuracies (such as the lack

67 R.R.333 "What are your expectations for the series?" *HBO/Treme/Talk/Forums/* 19 Apr. 2010.

68 labetaille, "What HBO's *Treme* meant?" *NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune*, 28 Dec. 2013.

69 cbcmarsh, "What HBO's *Treme* meant?" *NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune*, 13 Dec. 2013.

70 D. Smith325, "What are your expectations for the series?" *HBO/Treme/Talk/Forums/* 3. Oct. 2013.

71 Dorie D.473, "What are your expectations for the series?" *HBO/Treme/Talk/Forums/* 30 Dec. 2013.

72 See, for example, shastamcnastyinthepasty 30 Nov. 2013; PotatoSolution 29 Nov. 2013 <http://www.av-club.com/review/treme-dies-as-it-lived-106063>.

of authentic local accents), appeared “true-to-life”<sup>73</sup> or even “a love letter to New Orleans ... the beauty and the beast of the city.”<sup>74</sup> Indeed, quite a large number of residents desired to use the words “real”, “true”, or “authentic” to describe their point-of-view: “For my money, nobody has ever shown real live music in such an authentic and honest way. I live here in New Orleans, and I can tell you: what you see on this program is for real.”<sup>75</sup>

Whereas the commentators who identified themselves as residents discussed questions of authenticity concerning the way that the city was depicted, often only those non-residents who had visited New Orleans at some point shared this view. They argued that the show “brings forth the culture that endears so many to New Orleans”<sup>76</sup> and “it captures the lunacy, beauty and uniqueness of New Orleans.”<sup>77</sup> Thus, for quite a few people the show reminded them of their own experiences of New Orleans:

I have visited New Orleans at least once a year for more than 30 years, drawn of course by the music, food, and spirit of the city. I was very nervous when I first learned “Treme” was in the works -- afraid they’d get it wrong. ... I am so glad to have been so wrong.<sup>78</sup>

Many of those without personal experience of the city had a more complicated relationship with authenticity and argued that too much emphasis was given to authenticity and the viewer needed too much local information to make sense of the series.<sup>79</sup>

Also, while the fragmented narrative solutions reminded one of the cultural trauma process, *Treme*’s solutions have not been always appreciated. In the online discussions, the opinions regarding the challenging narrative solutions were divided. Some found the storyline too slow, repetitive and hard to follow.<sup>80</sup> Others recognized the lack of clear plotlines, but argued

73 S.Smalls, “What are your expectations for the series?” *HBO/Treme/Talk/Forums/* 15 Feb. 2010.

74 E Johnson, “What are your expectations for the series?” *HBO/Treme/Talk/Forums/* 13 Apr. 2010.

75 Chiefbigeasy, “What HBO’s Treme meant?” *NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune*, 31 Dec. 2013.

76 J Hayes, “What are your expectations for the series?” *HBO/Treme/Talk/Forums/* 19 Apr. 2010.

77 Mercedes, “What are your expectations for the series?” *HBO/Treme/Talk/Forums/* 20 Jul. 2011.

78 Chicago Chief, “HBO’s ‘Treme’: Loved it? Hated it? Or what?” *NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune*, 4. Jan 2014.

79 For example, 4uvak, 29. Nov 2013; shastamcnastyinthepasty 30 Nov. 2013, <http://www.avclub.com/review/treme-dies-as-it-lived-106063>.

80 For example, Alfa60, “Its already stinkin” 26 Dec. 2013; drlowdon, “Difficult to Get Into,” 21 Nov. 2011; LouisaV, “Too slow,” 8 Jun. 2011. <http://www.tv.com/shows/treme/reviews/>.

that there is a lot happening at the level of everyday life in the music and cultural scenes as the city attempts to get back on its feet.<sup>81</sup> Typically, on the webpages not devoted to the series in itself, such as [avclub.com](http://avclub.com), negative reactions toward a lack of plot were more obvious than in the fan-based webpages, such as [hbo.com](http://hbo.com). Also, the fact that the series did not try to function in an expected way was the assumed reason for the series below average ratings. One viewer argued:

The lack of any real narrative killed any chance of the show reaching a wider audience. ... I really appreciate what Simon was trying to do, I just think it could have been better. The show could have been a compelling drama in the classic sense AND very "New Orleans" at the same time.<sup>82</sup>

Thus, whereas viewers were able to recognize the characters' traumatic experiences and the cultural traditions of New Orleans and feel sympathetic towards the representations of the city and the desire for its rebuilding, for some the fragmented narration failed to create an emotional engagement with the series, and thus, with the trauma narration. The series managed, at least partially, to create an emotional public sphere, yet some of its narrative solutions limited the effects and extent of this public discussion.

## Conclusion

As a cultural product, *Treme* actively engaged with post-Katrina New Orleans. It publicly commented on the cultural practices and rebuilding processes of the city. Through identifiable emotions and characters that represented the unique cultural and music traditions of the city, the television show participated in communicating the cultural trauma of the hurricane and its consequences. Despite its desire for recognizable experience, the television show did not aim at documenting the ongoing processes, but

81 For example, [kepa55](#), "Awesome series – why aren't you watching it?" 5 Dec. 2011; [CTGFire](#), "Fantastic show. Great music and acting in New Orleans after Katrina," 9 May 2011; [Barnardsmark](#), "The music alone makes this show," 8 May 2011; [GapingHeadwound](#), "Treme: the best parts of The Wire and more," 13 Jan. 2011. <http://www.tv.com/shows/treme/reviews/>.

82 [chickenwing11](#), "HBO's 'Treme': Loved it? Hated it? Or what?" *NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune*, 30 Dec. 2013.

rather, and more importantly, participated in creating imagined communities at and beyond New Orleans and even beyond the United States.<sup>83</sup> In this way, the show desired to go beyond the geographical limits of the city, and enable wide empathy and cultural participation in the city's soul and identity.

However, due to the same heightened sense of locality and cultural experiences, the show also faced difficulties in reaching these aims. Until the end, the producers' target audience appeared to be the people of New Orleans, and as such, it managed to create a morale boost for the suffering city. Whereas the series reached other audiences, especially (jazz) music fans, these outsider groups were on the margins and, as such, the influence of the show remained somewhat limited. In the end, the show emphasized more the creation of the trauma narrative that would empower the survivors than it managed to create support for the city.

83 See also Cook.